

Teaching with Video in an English Class

By Jiang Hemei

In recent years, the use of video in English classes has grown rapidly in China as a result of the increasing emphasis on communicative teaching techniques. Being a rich and valuable resource, video is well-liked by both students and teachers in China. Students like it because video presentations are interesting, challenging, and stimulating to watch. Video shows them how people behave in the culture whose language they are learning by bringing into the classroom a wide range of communicative situations. Teachers like it because video helps promote comprehension. We know that deficiencies in vocabulary can make even a simple task very difficult for our students. Video makes meaning clear by illustrating relationships in a way that is not possible with words. Picture is worth a thousand words.

Video is now widely used for oral practice in English teaching in China. The video course offered to college and university students of a conversation class is called *shiting shuo*. In Chinese *shiting* means “watching and listening” and *shuo* means “speaking.” As listening and speaking are the two major skills students should acquire, the video course not only teaches English through video but gets students to use the English they have learned in talking about the video.

Having used this approach in the classroom for years, I have found that the success of such an approach is dependent on methods and techniques as well as on the kind of activities you offer the class. What follows are examples and suggested activities I have used in dealing with the video course which have proved successful for me.

Preparations for Active Viewing

Just as in many English teaching situations, the teacher plays a key role in such a video course for s/he has the prime responsibility for creating a successful learning environment. Adequate preparation is necessary to promote active viewing and facilitate successful language acquisition.

This requires being familiar with the video materials before they are used in class. The teacher should develop a plan for each video unit and encourage active viewing. To aid comprehension, prepare viewing guides which are easy and related to the language level of your students. Active viewing is also encouraged by making a list of questions to be answered from the information. To develop creativity and self-expression, at least one follow-up activity should be designed for each lesson. In order to prepare students for active viewing, students should be told what is to be learned and what will be expected of them before, after, and during the viewing. Another successful approach is to give students a viewing task of some kind that can be done only by watching for specific things while viewing the video, a task that gets them involved in a meaningful way.

Suggested Methods and Activities

1. Active viewing and global comprehension: It is necessary for students to take an active part in watching video presentations because active viewing can not only focus students' attention on the main idea of the video presentation but also increase their enjoyment and satisfaction.

In order to help students get an overview of the content of the video presentation, write key questions on the blackboard about the presentation and ask students to keep the questions in mind as they watch. After viewing the video, have students answer the questions orally. For more detailed comprehension, provide students a cue sheet or viewing guides and let them watch the video presentation again, section by section, asking them to watch and listen for specific details or specific features of language. For example, in act 6 of episode 7 of *Family Album, U.S.A.* (an American TV play), Robbie and Alexandra are talking, but Alexandra is sad. The following viewing guides will help students discover the mixed feelings Alexandra has about staying in the U.S.A. and what Robbie does to cheer her up.

A. Why is Alexandra sad?

1. Alexandra likes the U.S.A., but she
2. Alexandra was glad to receive the letter from home, but it
3. Alexandra loves the Stewarts and the Molinas, but she

B. Pick the one who is also lonely and complete the statement.

1. Robbie is lonely too because he
2. Gemma, the dog, is also lonely because she

C. What does Robbie do to make Alexandra happy again?

He.....

2. Freeze framing and prediction: Freeze framing means stopping the picture on the screen by pressing the still or pause button. Video gives us an additional dimension of information about the characters' body language, facial expressions, emotions, reactions, and responses. Freeze the picture when you want to teach words and expressions regarding mood and emotions, to ask questions about a particular scene, or to call students' attention to some point. This technique is also useful if you want students to repeat something or to identify body language, and if you want to explore background detail. I can often find something new even when I have done a particular video lesson several times.

Family Album, U.S.A. has 26 episodes with three acts in each episode. I often let students try to predict what they will see on the basis of the title of each episode, and after the first act I let them

speculate on what will happen in the next act. Freeze framing is excellent for speculation, which I have found students enjoy. To fire the imagination of your students, it may be a good idea to pause at a certain point of the video presentation during the first viewing and get students to predict what will happen next, or to deduce further information about the characters based on what they have picked up from the video units.

3. *Silent viewing activity:* As video is an audiovisual medium, the sound and the vision are separate components. I would recommend silent viewing as a way of arousing student interests, stimulating thought, and developing skills of anticipation. By silent viewing, I mean playing the video segment with the sound off using only the picture. Silent viewing can be a *prediction* technique when students are watching a video for the first time. One way of doing this is to play the video segment without the sound and tell students to observe the behavior of the characters and to use their powers of deduction. Then press the *pause* button at intervals to stop the picture on the screen, and get students to guess what is happening and what the characters might be saying or ask students what has happened up to that point. Finally, replay the video segment with the sound on so that students can compare their impressions with what actually happens in the video.

4. *Sound on and vision off activity:* It can sometimes be interesting and useful to play a section of a video unit and remove the visual element from the presentation by obscuring the picture so that students can hear only the dialogue but are unable to see the action. Have students predict or reconstruct what has happened visually depending only on what they heard.

5. *Repetition and role-play:* If there are some difficult language points in the video unit, closely controlled repetition is a necessary step to communicative production exercises. Replay a scene on video with certain pauses for repetition either individually or in chorus. When students have a clear understanding of the presentation, get them to act out the scene using as much of the original version as they can remember. And when students become confident with role playing and are sure of vocabulary and language structures, a more creative activity can be introduced in which students are asked to improvise the scene to fit their views of the situation and the characters they are playing.

Role-play involves students as active participants. As each student plays the assigned role, s/he becomes more and more involved. My students like the activity because it helps them to better understand their own behavior and to be more able to respond in a positive way to various human relationships. In a word, role playing, a good communicative activity, is true preparation for real-life situations, and gives students a chance to apply what they are learning.

6. *Reproduction activity:* When students have seen a section, ask them to reproduce either what is being said, to describe what is happening, or to retell what has happened. Related to the story of the video presentation, reproduction activities can be organized in a number of ways, from paired retelling of parts of the video during the initial presentation to individual retelling of the summary of the video presentation after two or three viewings. This activity encourages students to try out their knowledge. Students will benefit from experimenting in English, even though it is challenging and mistakes are made. In general, oral reproduction is hard work, and students need

help, guidance, and reassurance. Write key words or cues on the board to help them tell the story of the presentation. The following is an example of Act 1, Episode 7 of *Family Album, U.S.A.*

Guided Oral Summary

1. Alexandra-unhappy-received letter-home
2. Alexandra-lonely-without-family-miss-family
3. Robbie-cheer up-Alexandra
4. Robbie-suggest-go out for food
5. Gemma-dog-appear-Alexandra-better
6. Gemma-look-lonely-without-family

7. Dubbing activity: I have found one activity that my students seem to enjoy is completing a scene from the video by dubbing. This can be done after a review of the video material or when students have the necessary language competence. There are two ways to do it.

1. Play the video episode again. Turn the sound down at random intervals inviting students to fill in the missing dialogue orally.
2. Choose an interesting scene from the video and play it again. Turn the sound off, leaving students with only the visual information. Ask the students to fill in the script in response to the visual cues they receive.

8. Follow-up activity: Discussion, one of the primary aims of shiting shuo stimulates communication among students, so it is important that a video presentation should lead to follow-up activities as the basis for further extended oral practice. One way to achieve communicative practice is to conduct a discussion of what is presented in the video unit. Discussion offers students an opportunity to develop sharing and cooperative skills.

Preparation for Discussion

A good discussion helps to arouse interest because the students taking part are challenged to think. However, it requires careful and thoughtful planning. The discussion is usually more successful when the teacher has clear goals and purposes in mind, both in the advance planning stage, and during the discussion.

To make sure that students have something to say or something to share, prepare the necessary vocabulary that students need to express their ideas about the discussion topic. If you want to review and reinforce the ideas or viewpoints in the video, assign students responsibility for making a list of key points that support a particular position in the video presentation and then use these as a starting point for discussion. This activity provides students an opportunity to grasp the full meaning and gain deeper insight into the face-to-face exchange of information, the ideas and the opinions presented in the video. If you want to use the topic of the video unit for

expansion and want students to express their own opinions, it is better to compose a list of questions to guide and focus the discussion.

Conducting a Discussion

Before discussion, tell students the purpose of the discussion activity. When students are clear about the objective of the activity, they will be actively involved in the discussion and make better contributions. Begin the discussion by dividing students into small groups and give the groups a time limit. It is a good idea to stop the discussion when most of the groups have finished so that they will not be bored waiting for the other groups to finish. Get students to talk about the discussion topic, and encourage all students to participate in the discussion. During the discussion, students will give opinions in their own way and in the light of their own past experience. Therefore, it is necessary to listen carefully so as to draw out the thoughts and feelings of the groups. Jot down the key points that emerge from the discussion and use these for summarizing the ideas discussed.

Conclusion

Video is an effective teaching aid, and teaching with video in a conversation class is exciting and stimulating. Watching video presentations for language-learning purposes should be an active process for students. Effective methods and techniques as well as a wide variety of activities will ensure active viewing and participation from students. The output from the video is a two-way process in which students predict and perform segments as well as try to comprehend meaning. My students enjoy the above activities because they are prepared for what will be presented on the screen and ready to participate effectively through active viewing.

I hope the methods and activities suggested here will be of use to teachers dealing with a video course.

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